

# **Self-Management in Revolutionary Spain, 1936–1937**

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Self-management in revolutionary Spain is relatively little known. Even within the Republican camp it was more or less passed over in silence or disparaged. The horrible civil war submerged it, and still submerges it today in people's memories. It is not mentioned at all in the film *To Die in Madrid*.<sup>1</sup> And yet, it was perhaps the most positive legacy of the Spanish Revolution: the attempt at an original form of socialist economy.

In the wake of the revolution of July 19, 1936, the swift popular response to the Francoist coup d'état, many agricultural estates and factories had been abandoned by their owners. Agricultural day laborers were the first to decide to continue cultivating the land. Their social consciousness seems to have been even higher than that of the urban workers. They spontaneously organized themselves into collectives. In August a union conference was held in Barcelona representing several hundred thousand agricultural workers and small farmers. The legal blessing only occurred shortly afterwards: on October 7, 1936, the central Republican government nationalized the lands of "persons involved in the fascist rebellion."

The agricultural collectives gave themselves dual management, both union and communal, with the communalist spirit predominating. At general assemblies peasants elected a management committee of eleven members in each village. Aside from the secretary, all of the members continued to work with their hands. Labor was mandatory for all healthy men between eighteen and sixty. The peasants were divided into groups of ten or more, with a delegate at their head. Each group was assigned a zone of cultivation or a function in accordance with the age of its members and the nature of the task. Every evening the management committee received the delegates of the groups. They frequently invited the residents to a general assembly of the neighborhood for an account of their activity.

Everything was held in common, except personal savings, and livestock and fowl destined for family consumption. The artisans, hairdressers, and cobblers were grouped in collectives. The sheep of the community, for example, were distributed in groups of three to four hundred, entrusted to two shepherds and methodically distributed across the mountain.

Wage labor and, partially at least, money were abolished. Each worker or family received in remuneration for his labor a bond denominated in pesetas that could only be exchanged for consumer goods in communal stores, often located in churches or their out-buildings. The unused sum was credited to the individual's reserve account. It was possible to withdraw pocket money from this sum in limited amounts. Rent, electricity, medical care, pharmaceutical products, and old age assistance were free, as was school, which was often located in a former convent and mandatory for all children below fourteen, for whom manual labor was prohibited.

Membership in the collective was voluntary. No pressure was exercised on small landowners. They could, if they wished, participate in common tasks and place their products in the communal stores. They were admitted to general assemblies, benefiting from most of the advantages of the community. They were only prevented from owning more land than they could cultivate and one condition was posed: that their person or property not disturb the collective order. In most socialized villages the number of individuals who stood on their own, peasants or merchants, grew ever smaller.

The communal collectives were united in cantonal federations, above which were provincial federations. The land of a cantonal federation formed one holding, without boundary markings.

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<sup>1</sup> A 1962 documentary by Frédéric Rossif. English-language films in which the collectivizations do feature include Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995); see also Mark Littlewood, *Ethel MacDonald: An Anarchist's Story* (2007),

Solidarity between villages was pushed to the extreme. Compensation funds allowed for the assisting of the least favored collectives.

## From One Province to Another

Rural socialization varied in importance from one province to another. In Catalonia, a land of small and mid-sized property, where farmers had strong individualist traditions, it was reduced to a few tiny islands, the peasant union confederation wisely preferring to first convince landowners by the exemplary success of a few pilot collectives.

On the other hand, in Aragon more than three quarters of the lands were socialized. The passage of a Catalan militia, the famous Durruti Column, en route for the north to fight the Francoists, and the subsequent creation of a revolutionary power issued from the rank and file, the only one of its kind in Republican Spain, stimulated the creative initiative of the agricultural workers. Around 450 collectives were formed, bringing together 600,000 members. In the province of Levante (its capital Valencia), the richest in Spain, some 600 collectives arose. They took in 43 percent of all localities, 50 percent of citrus production and 70 percent of its distribution. In Castile 300 collectives were formed with 100,000 members on the initiative of 1,000 volunteers sent as experts in self-management by Levante. Socialization also touched Extremadura and a portion of Andalucía. There were a few attempts at it in Asturias, but they were quickly repressed.

It should be noted that this socialism from the base was not, as some believe, the work of the anarchists alone. According to Gustave Leval's testimony, those engaged in self-management were often "anarchists without knowing it."<sup>2</sup> Among the latter provinces enumerated above, it was the socialist, Catholic, and in Asturias even Communist peasants who took the initiative in self-management.

When it was not sabotaged by its enemies or hindered by the war, agricultural self-management was an unquestionable success. The land was united into one holding and cultivated over great expanses according to a general plan and the directives of agronomists. Small landowners integrated their plots with those of the community. Socialization demonstrated its superiority both over large absentee landholdings, which left a part of the land unplanted, and over smallholdings, cultivated with the use of rudimentary techniques, inadequate seeding, and without fertilizer. Production increased by 30–50 percent. The amount of cultivated land increased, working methods were improved, and human, animal, and mechanical energy used more rationally. Farming was diversified, irrigation developed, the countryside partially reforested, nurseries opened, pigsties constructed, rural technical schools created, pilot farms set up, livestock selected and increased, and auxiliary industries set in motion, etc.

In Levante, the initiatives taken for the marketing of agricultural goods deserve mention. The war having caused a temporary closing of foreign markets and of the part of the internal market controlled by Franco, the oranges were dried; and wherever a greater quantity than previously was obtained, essence was extracted from the peel and orange honey, orange wine, medical alcohol, and pulp for the saving of blood from slaughterhouses for use to feed fowl was produced. Factories concentrated orange juice. When the peasant federation succeeded in reestablishing re-

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<http://www.spanishcivilwarfilm.com>. [DB]

<sup>2</sup> Gaston Leval, *Espagne libertaire 36–39* (Editions du Cercle/Editions de la Tete de feuilles, 1971). [Published in English as *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1975) —DB]

lations with French ports it ensured the marketing of agricultural goods through its warehouses, its trucks, its cargos, and its sales outlets in France.

These successes were due, for the most part, to the people's initiative and intelligence. Though a majority were illiterate, the peasants demonstrated a socialist consciousness, practical common sense, and a spirit of solidarity and sacrifice that inspired admiration in foreign visitors. Fenner Brockway of the Independent Labour Party, after a visit to the collective of Segorbe, testified to this: "The mood of the peasants, their enthusiasm, the way in which they made their contributions to the common effort, their pride in it, all of this is admirable."

## **The Sabotage of Self-management**

However, there was no lack of difficulties. Credit and foreign commerce, by the will of the bourgeois Republican government, remained in the hands of the private sector. To be sure, the state controlled the banks, but it avoided putting them at the service of self-management. Lacking circulating funds, many collectives lived on what they had seized at the time of the July 1936 revolution. Afterwards they had to resort to makeshift methods, like seizing jewelry and precious objects belonging to the churches, convents, Francoists, etc. Self-management also suffered from a lack of agricultural machinery and, to a lesser degree, a lack of technical cadres.

But the most serious obstacle was the hostility, at first hidden and then open, of the various political general staffs of Republican Spain. Even a party of the Far Left such as the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) was not always well disposed towards the collectives.<sup>3</sup> This authentically popular movement, the herald of a new order, spontaneous and improvised, and jealous of its autonomy, offended the machine of the Republican state as much as it did private capitalism. It united against it both the property-owning class and the apparatuses of the parties of the Left in power. Self-management was accused of breaking the "unity of the front" between the working class and the petit bourgeoisie and thus of playing into the hands of the Francoist enemy. Which did not prevent the detractors from refusing weapons to the revolutionary vanguard, reduced, in Aragon, to confronting the fascist machineguns barehanded, and then to be attacked for "inertia."

On the radio the new Catalan minister of the economy, Comorera, a Stalinist, incited peasants not to join the collectives, suggested to the small landowners that they combat them, and at the same time took resupplying from the hands of the workers' unions and favored private commerce. Thus encouraged from above, the dark forces of reaction increasingly sabotaged the experiment in self-management.

In the end, the government coalition, after the crushing of the "Barcelona Commune" in May 1937 and the outlawing of the POUM, did not hesitate to liquidate agricultural self-management by any means necessary. A decree dated August 10, 1937, pronounced the dissolution of the revolutionary authority in Aragon on the pretext that it "remained outside the centralizing current." One of its main inspirations, Joaquin Ascaso, was indicted for "sale of jewelry" destined, in reality, for procuring funds for the collectives. Immediately afterwards, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of Commandant Lister (a Stalinist), supported by tanks, went into action against the collectives. The leaders were

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<sup>3</sup> The POUM was formed by Andreu Nin and Joaquin Maurin in 1935 and was affiliated internationally to the so-called London Bureau alongside the ILP (Independent Labour Party) in Britain and the PSOP (Workers' and Peasants' Socialist Party) in France (of which Guérin was a prominent member at the time). [DB]

arrested, their offices occupied and then shut down, the management committees dissolved, the communal stores robbed, the furniture smashed, and the flocks dispersed. Around 30 percent of the collectives of Aragon were completely destroyed.

In Levante, in Castile, in the provinces of Huesca and Teruel, armed attacks of the same kind were perpetrated—by Republicans—against agricultural self-management. It survived—barely—in certain regions that had not yet fallen into the hands of the Francoists, notably in Levante.

## **Industrial Self-management**

In Catalonia, the most industrialized region of Spain, self-management also demonstrated its worth in industry. Workers whose employers had fled spontaneously set to keeping their factories working. In October 1936 a union congress was held in Barcelona representing 600,000 workers with the object of socializing industry. The workers' initiative was ratified by a decree of the Generalitat, the Catalan government, on October 24, 1936. Two sectors were created, one socialist, the other private. The socialized factories were those with more than a hundred workers (those with between fifty and a hundred could be socialized at the request of three quarters of the workers), those whose owners had been declared "seditious" by a popular tribunal or who had abandoned its running, and finally those whose importance to the national economy justified their being removed from the private sector (in fact, a number of enterprises in debt were socialized).

The socialized factories were led by a management committee with between five and thirteen members, representing the various services, elected by the workers in a general assembly, with a two-year term, half of them to be renewed every year. The committee selected a director to whom it delegated all or part of its powers. In the key factories the selection of the director had to be approved by the regulatory body. In addition, a government inspector was placed on every management committee.

The management committee could be revoked either by the general assembly or by a general council of the branch of industry (composed of four representatives of the management committees, eight from the workers' unions, and four technicians named by the regulatory body). This general council planned the work and determined the distribution of profits. Its decisions were legally binding.

In those enterprises that remained in private hands, an elected workers' committee controlled the working conditions "in close collaboration with the employer."

The decree of October 24, 1936, was a compromise between the aspiration for autonomous management and the tendency towards state oversight and planning, as well as a transition between capitalism and socialism. It was written by an anarchist minister and accepted by the CNT (National Confederation of Labor), the anarchist union, because the anarcho-syndicalists participated in the Catalan government.

In practice, despite the considerable powers granted the general councils of the branches of industry, worker self-management risked leading to a selfish particularism, each production unit concerned only about its own interests. This was remedied by the creation of a central equalization fund, allowing for the equitable distribution of resources. In this way the surplus of the Barcelona bus company was transferred to the less profitable tram company.

Exchanges occurred between industrial and peasant collectives, the former exchanging underwear or clothing for the olive oil of the latter.

In the suburbs of Barcelona, in the commune of Hospitalitè, on whose borders farmers were involved in the planting of crops, the agricultural and industrial (metals, textile, etc.) self-managed organizations joined together in one communal authority elected by the people, which ensured the provisioning of the city.

Outside of Catalonia, notably in Levante, industrial self-management was experimented with in a few locations. This was the case in Alcoy, near Alicante, where 20,000 textile workers and steel workers managed the socialized factories and created consumer cooperatives, as well as in Clastellón de la Plana, where the steel factories were integrated into larger units under the impetus of a technical commission in daily contact with each of its management committees.

But like agricultural self-management, industrial self-management faced the hostility of the administrative bureaucracy, the authoritarian socialists, and the Communists. The central Republican government refused it any credits, even when the Catalan minister of the economy, the anarchist Fabregas, offered the billions on deposit in the savings banks as a guarantee for the advances to self-management. When he was replaced in 1937 by Comorera the latter deprived the self-managed factories of the primary material they lavished on the private sector. It also neglected to ensure the deliveries ordered by the Catalan administration to the socialized enterprises.

## **Industrial Self-management Dismantled**

Later, the central government used the pretext of the needs of national defense to seize control of the war industries. By a decree of August 23, 1937, it suspended the application of the Catalan socialization decree of October 1936 in the steel and mining industries, said to be “contrary to the spirit of the constitution.” The former supervisors and the directors removed under self-management or, more precisely, who had not wanted to accept posts as technicians in self-managed enterprises, resumed their posts, with revenge in their hearts.

Catalan industrial self-management nevertheless survived in other branches until the crushing of Republican Spain in 1939. But industry having lost its main outlets and lacking in primary materials the factories that did not work for national defense were only able to operate with severely reduced staff and hours.

In short, Spanish self-management, hardly born, was restrained within the strict framework of a war fought with classic military methods in the name (or under cover) of which the republic clipped the wings of its vanguard and compromised with internal reaction. Despite the unfavorable conditions under which it took place and the brevity of its existence, which prohibits an evaluation and accounting of its results, the experiment opened new perspectives for socialism, for an authentic socialism, animated from the bottom up, the direct emanation of the workers of the country and the cities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Sam Dolgoff, *Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–39* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975); Frank Mintz, *Anarchism and Workers' Self-management in Revolutionary Spain* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012). [DB]

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